

**Review of G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (1978, 2000)
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G.A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*¹ (hereafter '*KMTH*') must be included in any shortlist of canonical works on historical materialism², and indeed canonical works on Marx and Marxism more generally. Originally published in 1978, *KMTH* is justly famous for two overriding reasons: first, it stages the initial and (to date) most sustained encounter between Anglo-American analytic philosophy and Marx (it is the urtext of analytical Marxism); and second, it unapologetically presents an 'old-fashioned' historical materialism, "in which history is, fundamentally, the growth of human productive power, and forms of society rise and fall according as they enable or impede that growth."³ As anyone familiar with *KMTH* knows, Cohen's emphasis is the distinction between the forces and relations of production, and therefore between the material and social properties of society (for Cohen, materiality and sociality are 'antonyms'). More specifically, what is decisive for him is the primacy of the productive forces over the production relations⁴, whereby the forces (the material – namely *technological* – basis of society) functionally determine the relations (the economic structure of society). In short, this dynamic (not dialectic, which analytical Marxism shuns) between the forces and relations of production provides history with its forward direction and movement.⁵ We are thus introduced to a theory of history whose inspiration is unquestionably the 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*⁶, not *The German Ideology* nor *Communist Manifesto*, and whose model is accordingly 'base-superstructure', not 'need' nor 'class struggle'.

It is difficult not to be taken aback by the obstinance of the Introduction (to the 2000 edition) of *KMTH*: 'Reflections on Analytical Marxism'. It is not the frequent appeals to clarity, precision, and rigour that surprises: these are the virtues with which most analytic philosophers self-identify, and Cohen predictably invokes them to declare that his account of historical materialism is less 'untidy' and 'ambiguous' than Marx's.⁷ It is, rather, the caustic and dismissive language that Cohen utilises to differentiate analytical Marxism from other epistemologies – particularly "so-called 'dialectical'

¹ The focus of this review is the 2000 expanded edition: G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). The most important feature of this new edition is its Introduction, which addresses Cohen's 'Reflections on Analytical Marxism'.

² Following Cohen, I use the expression 'historical materialism' as shorthand for Marx's concept of history, but it is essential to bear in mind that, as Massimiliano Tomba asserts, "Historical materialism' as a theory of history or a materialist concept of history does not exist." See Massimiliano Tomba, *Marx's Temporalities*, trans. Peter D. Thomas and Sara R. Farris (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), p. vii. The point here is that Marx never uses the term 'historical materialism' in his work, and that, as I contend elsewhere, the existence of the nascent materialist concept of history in *The German Ideology* destabilises the codified tradition known as 'Historical Materialism', whose authority is often signalled with capital letters.

³ Cohen, *KMTH*, p. x.

⁴ Ibid. p. 134.

⁵ When it comes to historical progress, "miscarriages [...] are guaranteed not to occur." Ibid. p. 142.

⁶ The existence of *KMTH* hinges on the 1859 Preface. Its most renowned passage frames the book, Cohen later offers "evidence of the permanence of the Preface perspective in Marx's mature thought," and finally he characterises it as "canonical." Ibid. pp. 142, 375.

⁷ Ibid. p. ix.

thinking”⁸ – which must be considered. Throughout the Introduction, Cohen makes several claims to the effect that analytical philosophy undoubtedly holds the upper hand in the union between it and Marxism. “The fateful operation that created analytical Marxism was the rejection of the claim that Marxism possesses valuable intellectual methods of its own,” such that the dialectical method, as opposed to its analytical ‘rival’, “thrives only in an atmosphere of unclear thought.”⁹ Therefore, the commitment to the techniques of the better half of the marriage that is ‘analytical Marxism’ is ‘absolute’ and ‘unrevisable’, “nothing less than a commitment to reason itself.”¹⁰ All in all, the fate of every non-analytical Marxism after analytical Marxism is sealed: “there exists Marxism which is neither analytical nor bullshit, but, once such [...] pre-analytical Marxism encounters analytical Marxism, then it must either become analytical or become bullshit.”¹¹ However else one may read these passages, it is suggestive that nowhere in the Introduction (nor Chapters 12-15, also new to the 2000 edition) does Cohen acknowledge, let alone discuss, over two decades of rational critiques of analytical Marxism, of which there are many.¹² He engages critical responses to the 1978 original edition, but only those that take (1) analytical Marxism for granted and, thus, (2) Cohen to task for not being ‘analytical enough’ (insofar as they expose lingering inconsistencies and ambiguities). The sanctity of analytical Marxism as such is not up for debate.

After a brief overview of competing conceptions of history in Hegel and Marx in Chapter 1, Cohen begins in earnest his signature methodological procedure, which in Chapters 2 and 3 assumes the form of various terminological and conceptual specifications (of ‘object of labour’, ‘labour-power’, ‘raw material’, ‘instrument of production’, ‘class’, ‘mode of production’, etc.), each of which bolster the conceptual distinction and relation – between ‘productive forces’ and ‘economic structure’ (the entirety of a society’s production relations¹³) – that defines *KMTH*. Stylistically, this goes hand-in-hand with a series of finely-tuned logical-semantic clarifications so precise as to occasionally render them imprecise,¹⁴ and passages resembling more of a detailed legal brief or instruction manual than academic work on Marx. Yet to get to the bottom of the difference between productive forces and relations of production – to comprehend why, for Cohen, the former take priority and ‘functionally explain’ the latter – we must turn to the most philosophically consequential chapter in *KMTH*, the one that attempts to reveal “Marx’s systematic opposition [...] between the *material* and the *social*.”¹⁵ This opposition is the philosophical heart of Cohen’s reconstruction of historical materialism, and it has significant ramifications for his understanding of history and historical time.

The fundamental purpose of Chapter 4, ‘Material and Social Properties of Society’, is to introduce two analytically and ontologically separate domains – the material and the social – corresponding, respectively, to the distinction between the forces and relations of production. In this conception, a force of production is “not a relation,” whose “non-social character [...] takes on social form”¹⁶

⁸ Ibid. p. xvii.

⁹ Ibid. pp. xvii, xxiii.

¹⁰ Ibid. pp. xxiv. It is “irrational obscurantism to resist analytical reasoning.” Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. pp. xxvi.

¹² See e.g. Marcus Roberts, *Analytical Marxism: A Critique* (London: Verso, 1996), and Sean Sayers, “Marxism and the Dialectical Method: A Critique of G.A. Cohen,” *Radical Philosophy* 36 (Spring 1984), pp. 4-13.

¹³ Cohen, *KMTH*, p. 63.

¹⁴ For instance, “labouring activity is not used in production; it *is* production,” or likewise, “*forms within which* the productive forces are developed, even if not by means of those very forms.” Ibid. pp. 43, 171.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 30.

¹⁶ Ibid. pp. 28, 90.

when it is situated within a relation of production. Herein lies the philosophical ground of Cohen's 'primacy thesis', that is to say, "*the nature of a set of production relations is explained by the level of development of the productive forces embraced by it.*"¹⁷ Interestingly (given Cohen's analytical desire for consistency), there is no modified but equivalent thesis in *KMTH* for the material-social relation: Cohen never directly writes something like "the nature of the social is explained by the level of development of the material embraced by it." Yet this is undeniably his position, which, in the wake of establishing a conceptual connection between 'nature' and materiality,¹⁸ is most comprehensively expressed by the following passage:

We are arguing that the familiar distinction between forces and relations of production is, in Marx, one of a set of contrasts between nature and society. Commentators have failed to remark how often he uses 'material' as the antonym of 'social' and of 'formal', how 'natural' belongs with 'material' against 'social', and how what is described as material also counts as the 'content' of some form. (Other terms of the material vocabulary are 'human', 'simple', and 'real', while 'historical' and 'economic' consort with 'social'.) The upshot of these oppositions and identifications is that *the matter or content of society is nature, whose form is the social form*. Marx's materialism is perhaps several things, but the explanation of social history as serving material development is certainly one of them.¹⁹

Marx's materialism *is* several things, but is it really predicated, using Cohen's words, on a systematic opposition between the material (hence nature, the human, the simple, the real, the content, etc.) and the social (hence the formal, the historical, the economic, etc.), such that "production relations are *economic* in character, while productive forces are not," or that "materially conceived, the labour process is human rather than social?"²⁰ And does the 'material' in Marx's materialism really explain, and determine, the social?

The short answer to both of these questions is 'no': there is no systematic opposition between 'the material' and 'the social' in Marx, and thus the former neither functionally explains nor determines the latter. In short, 'material' and 'social' are, for Marx, *two different expressions of one and the same thing: sensuous human activity* (which at the level of historical ontology is labour). But before moving on to the effects that this has for *KMTH*, we must first explain why, on Marx's terms, Cohen's systematic opposition is mistaken.²¹

Marx's critical reconstruction of the concept of materialism extends through his entire corpus, but it begins with his 1845 *Theses on Feuerbach* (hereafter '*Theses*'), which reject the notion that a sensible object of appearance [*Gegenstand*] is captured merely by intuition, or only as an object of knowledge [*Objekt*]. The *Theses* directly target the 'old', or 'substantialist', or 'matter-based' materialism (which is polemically and reductively assigned to Feuerbach), so as to create space for a 'new', or 'practical',

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 134.

¹⁸ "The material description captures a society's underlying *nature*." Ibid. p. 96.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 98. This passage undercuts Cohen's claim that "*no social characteristics may be deduced from their [men and productive forces] material characteristics,*" so that a machine is thus still a machine if we ignore its "social relational, economic properties." Ibid. 91-2. If the difference between the forces and relations of production constitutes 'one of a set of contrasts between nature and society', then surely *some* social characteristics must be deduced from their material bases.

²⁰ Ibid. pp. 29, 101.

²¹ A similar and convincing argument along these lines is Charles W. Mills's "Is it Immaterial that there's a 'Material' in Historical Materialism?," *Inquiry* 32:3 (September 1989), pp. 323-42.

or ‘human’ materialism. According to Marx, the chief defect of existing materialism is that it is pre-Kantian: it has no viable concept of the subject. At the same time, Marx criticises the character of Kant’s subjective constitution of objectivity (which Feuerbach adopts). In this sense, the *Theses* are a critical extension of the subject-object relation of modern epistemology as inaugurated by Kant: an extension, because they outline the first materialism of the subject in the post-Kantian tradition; critical, because they reject the sensuously passive and hence ideally active character of the subject-object relation in Kant’s transcendental logic. Because the *Theses* declare that objectivity, sensibility, and actuality are not understood subjectively by existing discourses of materialism, Marx confronts both the old metaphysics of matter in these discourses *and* the dynamism of subjectivity in Kant. The transformation of a sensible object of appearance [*Gegenstand*] presented to consciousness by intuition into an object of knowledge [*Objekt*] is a movement, from actual passivity to ideal activity, which defines the subject in Kant. It is a movement that authorises the universality and necessity of the pure concepts of the understanding. Thus to state (as Marx does), that objectivity, sensibility, and actuality are not grasped subjectively by ‘all hitherto existing materialism’ is to suggest, against Kant, that the subject can be nothing else than ‘sensuous human activity’ itself, nothing else than practice. As Étienne Balibar puts it, after the *Theses*, “...the only true subject is the practical subject or the subject of practice or, better still, that *the subject is nothing other than practice* which has always already begun and continues indefinitely.”²²

There are two outcomes which emerge from this practical materialism. First, as an epistemological critique of an epistemological discourse, the *Theses* dialecticise the subject-object relation, such that ‘sensuous human activity’ destabilises any self-sufficient barrier between the subject and the object, between the ‘knower’ and the ‘known’. It is in this context that Wal Suchting contends that subject and object are not pre-constituted before practice, but rather constituted *within* it.²³ Second, Marx’s speculative redefinition of the subject as practice stakes a claim on behalf of the ontological basis of this epistemological discourse. In this way, the subject and the object, here dialectically rendered as ‘sensuous activity’ on both sides, become in Marx epistemological derivations of an ontologically basic practice. In his transformation of a distinctly epistemological problematic, Marx enables the creation of a concept of ‘practice’ that moves dialectically and unevenly between epistemology and ontology. If this concept grounds the subject-object relation of modern epistemology, the ‘is’ and the ‘practice’ in the thesis “the subject is practice” are the copula and predicate of a philosophical proposition, and, after Hegel, are dialectical moments of a speculative identity.

All told, the ‘material’ of Marx’s new materialism is *practice itself*: ‘sensuous human activity’. All told, the ‘material’ (whether grasped subjectively or objectively) is *not* matter: this is the old materialism that Marx rejects, yet this is the very materialism that Cohen mistakenly ascribes to Marx.²⁴ In order to fill out this critique of *KMTH*, however, we must also briefly look at Marx’s redefinition of ‘the human’ in the *Theses*. The first two sentences of the sixth thesis are instructive:

Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the *human* essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inhabiting each single individual. In its actuality [*Wirklichkeit*], it is the ensemble of social relations.²⁵

²² Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1995), p. 25.

²³ W.A. Suchting, *Marx and Philosophy: Three Studies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986), p. 57.

²⁴ The terms ‘material’ and ‘matter’ are used interchangeably in *KMTH*.

²⁵ Karl Marx, *Thesen über Feuerbach*, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx Engels Werke*, Band 3 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1978), p. 6. The translation is mine. Emphasis added.

At first, Marx does not discuss the meaning of ‘the human’ in his redefinition of the material object as sensuous human activity. In this thesis, however, Marx squarely confronts ‘human essence’ in a fashion that confirms the status of his materialism as ‘new’. What grounds this confirmation, such that new concepts of ‘the human’ and ‘essence’ emerge, is the fact that Marx explicitly poses this question at the level of actuality.²⁶ Marx’s concept of the human is not new because this human is actual: to make this claim is to forget Marx’s indebtedness to Hegel’s standpoint in the *Logic* that subjectivity resides in the concrete fullness of abstraction within consciousness. Rather, this is a conceptually new human because the actuality is here unequivocally *social*. Human essence is, from the outset, the ‘ensemble of social relations’. Marx deliberately utilises the French term ‘*ensemble*’ in order to denote a fluid, open, and indeterminate unity that evades, against Hegel, the “hierarchical completeness associated, philosophically, with the German terms for totality [*Totalität*] and whole [*Ganzel*].”²⁷ Far from representing the human as a discrete individual with inherent attributes²⁸, here Marx contends that it is how such attributes are socially produced and distributed that determines its essential character. In this respect, the ‘material’ of Marx’s materialism *is* the practical unity of the ensemble of social relations. Cohen’s systematic opposition is, therefore, mistaken: the material *is* the social (and the human is, needless to say, indelibly social). Finally, it must also be stated that, after *The German Ideology*, ‘labour’ conceptually replaces ‘sensuous human practice’, since, for Marx, labour ‘historicalises’. As the ‘material’ of historical materialism, labour *constitutes* history. Following Heidegger, it not only temporalises – creates time – but historicalises: it creates time that is itself constitutive of history.

This philosophical excursion into Marx’s reconstruction of materialism is the basis from which the central claims of *KMTH* – above all the ‘primacy thesis’ – can be questioned. When, as previously cited, Cohen states that “production relations are *economic* in character, while productive forces are not,”²⁹ there is something logically ironic about the fact that, to use the orthodox phrase, the ‘prime mover’ of history and historical time is strictly speaking *outside* of history (in the Kantian sense it is an *extra*-historical condition of possibility of history), insofar as the historical status of a productive force is only confirmed *subsequent* to its determination of a production relation. This points to one of the distinguishing features of *KMTH*: several ironies that, taken together, cast serious doubt on the philosophical and political sustainability of Cohen’s analytical Marxism. It is useful to consider two of the more significant of these to close out this review.

A first noteworthy irony of *KMTH* is its juxtaposition of, on the one hand, *highly detailed* expositions of key conceptual terms (e.g. ‘force of production’, ‘relation of production’, ‘base’, ‘superstructure’) and interrogations of the premises of expositions that differ from Cohen’s, and, on the other hand, the unstated acceptance of the meaning of other concepts central to Cohen’s argument (‘ideology’, ‘class struggle’, and in particular ‘technology’, stand out) as self-evident, merely requiring alignment with the rigour and clarity reserved for other concepts. It is remarkable, for instance, that nowhere in *KMTH* is there dedicated analysis of the concept of technology (Marx’s or Cohen’s), despite its

²⁶ Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, pp. 28-9.

²⁷ Peter Osborne, *How to Read Marx* (London: Granta Books, 2005), p. 30.

²⁸ This is a far cry from the rational choice theory that motivates Cohen, wherein ‘the human’ is essentially an individual that rationally pursues his interests to improve his life. See Cohen, *KMTH*, pp. xviii, 152. For Cohen, capitalism is *irrational* – it violates ‘reason itself – because it corrupts individuals’ (otherwise rational) preference structures, and stifles the worker’s ability to maximise his marginal utility. Ibid. pp. 319, 321. It is remarkable that neoclassical economic theories and concepts are used to *criticise* capitalism.

²⁹ Ibid. pp. 29.

absolute importance to Cohen's comprehension of productive forces.³⁰ There is nothing in *KMTH* that articulates, let alone surpasses, the everyday and minimal meaning of 'technology' as the array of tools, techniques, and machines that humans imagine, create, and use to satisfy social needs (the basic means-ends – instrumentalist – understanding of technology). Is this just a particular example of Cohen failing to live up to his own analytical standard – not being 'analytical enough' – or is it indicative of a more substantial problem with analytical Marxism itself?

It is, I argue, the latter: something structural is at work. There is a constitutive tension at the heart of analytical Marxism³¹: its methodological rejection of dialectics qua 'analytical' is fundamentally at odds with the embrace of *actual* contradiction by Marxism, and it thereby creates an even greater disjunction between theory and actuality than what Marx, and Hegel before him, resolutely sought to overcome. In other words, analytical Marxism (and this generally applies to analytic philosophy as well) represents a form of world-building that is at once a specific form of world-evasion. At its core, Cohen's world is reminiscent of early Wittgenstein's: the facts in logical space. In this regard, the other noteworthy irony of *KMTH* is that, as a book that not only highlights but defends Marx's theory of history, it is at best indifferent and at worst hostile to the world-historical experience of capitalism. In what way precisely? How do we justify this claim?

Cohen presents an unashamedly 'traditional'³² reading of historical materialism: history is propelled by the mechanistic expansion of productive forces, shedding production relations as soon as they become fetters to the forces, thereby setting the stage for revolutions that create new, higher forces and relations. The arrow of history inexorably points upward ("regression is forbidden" and, again, "miscarriages [...] are guaranteed not to occur"³³), and with it the arrow of time inexorably points forward: historical time is plotted along a chronological grid and periodised according to the well-known 'four-stage story'.³⁴ To characterise this as an 'orthodox' view of history and historical time is an understatement. Cohen denies the charge, but this is clearly a form of historical determinism: when the subject of history is 'natural', asocial material, as opposed to social labour, the present is mortgaged to a known future. In other words, the unity of the open future is foreclosed, relegating the historical present to the banality of succession. Historical determinism attempts to silence the ineliminable contingency of history, above all the radical contingency of politics. Hence statements like the Russian Revolution was 'premature' due to "the incomplete development of the productive forces"³⁵ in Russia – as if 1989 was the foregone conclusion of 1917 – are made.

Yet the crux of Cohen's aforementioned indifference, even hostility, is to be found in the erasure of the colonialism, racism, and misogyny – in a word, the *violence* – that is historically and logically *internal* to capital. To the very limited extent that it considers this violence, *KMTH* takes the implicit

³⁰ Ibid. p. 179. Cohen acknowledges that many criticise *KMTH* as a case study of technological determinism. He accepts the charge of technological, but ignores that of determinism. Ibid. p. 147. More on the historical determinism of *KMTH* shortly.

³¹ I am aware that there is more than one 'analytical Marxism', but I am using Cohen's rendition in *KMTH* as illustrative of general problems shared, to different degrees, by each of its variants.

³² Ibid. p. x.

³³ Ibid. p. 142.

³⁴ In order, the four stages are: 'primitive classless society', 'pre-capitalist class society', capitalism, and 'non-primitive communism', or 'modern classless society'. Ibid. pp. 364-5. "And that is the story of humankind, according to historical materialism." Ibid. p. 365.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 392.

position that gendered and racialised lives are ‘add-ons’ to more vital material and social processes; they need not be conceptualised as part and parcel of the life of capitalism. Whether this is Cohen’s intended position or not is beside the point; it is evidenced by claims like “serfdom and slavery are in principle opposed to production for the accumulation of capital,” “slavery and sophisticated, improving productive forces exclude one another,” and, consequently, “the *antebellum* [US] South was possible only because it was exceptional [...] a malformation in an otherwise normal capitalist economic structure.”³⁶ These claims are not only demonstrably untrue – there is a direct correlation between *capitalist* enslaved labour and the expansion of productive forces – but they are predicated on a false separation between the ‘logic’ and ‘history’ of capital, as if history and historical time are not immanent to the systematic development of the value-form in *Capital*. In this case, these claims deny the racism at the heart of the relationship between capitalism and slavery.³⁷

KMTH has a dated feel to it. Since its publication, it has not aged well given the fanfare with which it announced itself. Suffice to say, Cohen’s declaration that, after analytical Marxism, non-analytical Marxism becomes bullshit has not come to fruition (it is notable that this declaration was still made in 2000, well past the heyday of analytic Marxism in the 1980s). Although analytic philosophy never took hold of Marxism in the way it did to philosophy more generally, it remains to be seen whether there are untapped, productive encounters between analytic philosophy and Marxism. *KMTH* does not work as a Marxist philosophy of history, but the future of analytic Marxism is still open.

³⁶ Ibid. pp. 187, 191, 185.

³⁷ It is crucial to note that it is impossible to square *KMTH* with Marx’s concept of ‘originary accumulation’ [*ursprüngliche Akkumulation*] in *Capital* (whose function is as much logical as it is historical). Cohen makes no mention of originary accumulation in *KMTH*, but suffice to say that Marx’s assertion that “in actual history [...] conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, violence, play the greatest part” creates a significant philosophical problem for Cohen. See Karl Marx, *Capital: a Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1: the Process of Production of Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 874.